NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

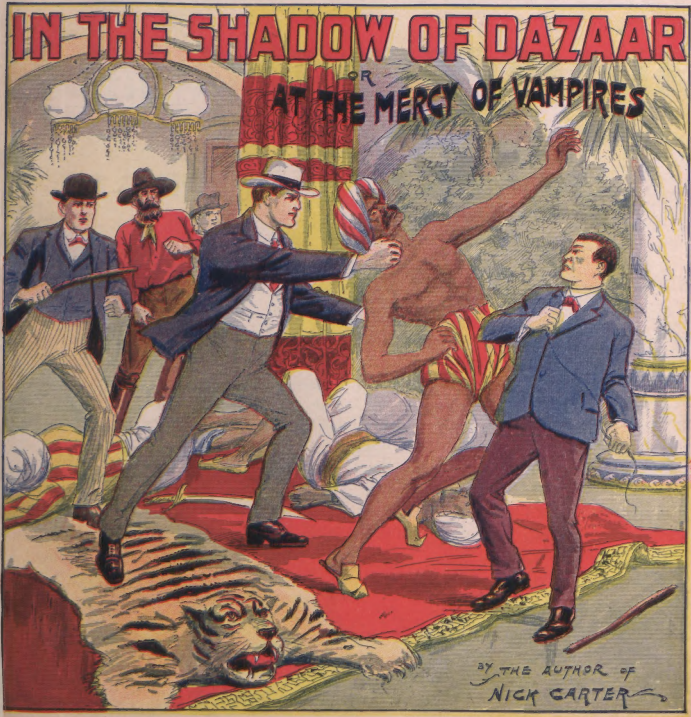
Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 396. Price, Five Cents.

IN THE SHADOW OF DAZAAR

OR

AT THE MERCY OF VAMPIRES



With a bound Nick Carter was upon the almost naked Hindu, and lifting the strangler clear from the floor, flung him a[illegible] the roo[illegible]rce of a catapult

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IN THE SHADOW OF DAZAAR;

OR,

At the Mercy of Vampires.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

GOTHMAR, THE STRANGLER.

Chickering Carter was seated near the window in Nick's study, looking out upon the gathering darkness, for the sun had gone down and evening shadows were falling like so many indefinite veils over the threads of daylight which still lingered hesitatingly among the haunts of men.

Chick was alone in the house, save for the servants on the basement floor—and, moreover, Chick looked wan and pale, as if he were just recovering from an illness, which, indeed, was the case.

He was stretched in a steamer chair before the open window, enjoying the breeze which sifted in upon him, when he was startled by the sound of a stealthy tread behind him.

Turning his head quickly, he discovered that there were three other persons, instead of one, in the room with him, and, with a frown upon his face, he essayed to rise.

But the effort was useless; he had not strength sufficient to leave the chair upon which he was reclining, and he sank back again among the cushions with a sigh of helplessness, which brought a smile of derision to the face of the man nearest him.

"The wings of the eagle have been clipped," he said, scornfully, smiling so that his snow white teeth gleamed through the darkness of the room, and his black eyes glistened like two sparks of fire above them. "The claws of the tiger are blunted; they cannot scratch; no?" and he laughed a low, chuckling laugh, which almost brought a shudder to Chick's nerves.

"Who are you?" he demanded, in a weak voice, for

he had strength scarcely sufficient to speak as he would have spoken.

"Ha!" responded the man, grimly. "You cannot fight, so you parley. You cannot resist, so you temporize. Is that it?"

"Who are you, and how did you get here?" demanded Chick again.

"I am Gothmar; does that tell you aught? And I came in at the door, as you may have observed," replied the man, smiling again, derisively.

"What do you want?"

"You; I want you!"

The reply was made softly—almost in a whisper, and yet somehow the utterance of it contained a terrible menace, which, although it was indefinable, was, nevertheless, real.

Chick calmed his tingling nerves, for he was so weak that he could not help feeling the effect of this sudden interruption, as he studied the man before him for a moment before he spoke again.

What he saw was a tall, lithe, agile-looking man with a swarthy skin; piercing, wicked, black eyes; gleaming white teeth, which he showed in an ever present but ominous smile; straight, black hair, and delicate, handsome features.

And yet, although the features were handsome, there was a suggestion of cruelty and cunning about them which was at once noticeable.

In dress the fellow was not unlike any other man one might see upon the street, save that the clothing did not look the same on his body.

Indeed, when he moved, there was a suggestion about every motion of his body that he was unused to such impedimenta as wearing apparal—as if he had been more accustomed to going about through the world half clad; and this, indeed, was true, although Chick did not realize it at the moment.

As for the two men who accompanied the stranger, they remained in the background and the shadow, so that it was just possible to determine that they were there.

"You want me?" Chick repeated after him. "Why? What for?"

"Ha! Who knows? For toasting, perhaps; for this—if I had my wish;" and he extended one hand from which dangled a long, slender cord made of braided human hair.

Chick could not repress a start of dread when the ominous cord was dangled before his eyes, for he recognized what it was the instant he saw it.

"The strangler's cord of India," he murmured aloud.

"Ha!" replied the man. "You recognize it. You have seen the like of it before. Perhaps—but no; you have never felt its delicate touch, for, if you had, you would not be talking to Gothmar now."

"Who sent you here, and what do you want?" demanded Chick again, more weakly than before.

"I come from a beauteous lady, sahib, who claims you for her husband. Ha! You seem to require no further information. Your face tells me that you recognize—Grach!" he swore, interrupting himself suddenly to dodge the book which Chick, weak though he was, had thrown at his head.

He smiled again so that his white teeth gleamed more menacingly than ever, and he took a step nearer to Chick.

"Grach!" he said again, evidently using a favorite expletive; and he held the terrible cord out before him until it dangled just in front of Chick's eyes. "Have a care, my clipped eagle, lest I forget the orders I received and squeeze your throat with this plaything. I was sent here to take you away, not to strangle you, but——"

He paused and shrugged his shoulders while he smiled again.

"Where would you take me, and for what?" asked Chick, lamely.

"I would take you to the other half of your duality. I would take you to the most beautiful, the most wise, the most bewitching, the most gracious lady in all the world—the lady who is called Dazaar."

Chick stiffened in his chair and seized the arms tightly in his grasp, as if he would cling to it, and so prevent this man from carrying out his purpose,

or he was very weak, and the threat which ordinarily would not have touched him, now seemed like a calamity too horrible to contemplate.*

Never in all his life before had he been placed where he longed to call for help; but now, had there been a chance that his voice might have brought assistance, he would have shouted with what strength he possessed.

Gothmar seemed to divine the thoughts that were passing through his brain, for he smiled his cruel smile yet again, and said:

"Do not call, sahib; nobody will come. We met one of the maids of the household on the stairs, and I silenced her with my cord; as for the others, they are below and will not disturb us—or, if they should, their fate will be the fate I love to confer."

"You have strangled one of the servants of this house?" said Chick, incredulously.

"Yes; she hardly knew that I was near. I met her on the stairs. She would have cried out, but, before she could utter a sound, the cord was around her neck—around that white throat; ha! Sahib, I would rather twist my cord around the neck of a woman than have her wind her arms around my own. There is more joy; more delight; more—but we tarry."

But Chick still sought to temporize, hoping against hope that Nick, or Ten-Ichi, or Patsy, or even Pommery might come.

"You lie to me," he said, boldly. "You cannot take me to Dazaar."

"And why, pray? I have but to lift you in these arms, which could carry two like you are, with ease, and so take you to the carriage that waits below; and then—selah! I take you to Dazaar."

"Dazaar is a prisoner," said Chick, desperately. "Nick Carter captured her at the meeting of Devil Worshipers, in Westchester."

Gothmar smiled devilishly.

"And has the man who never lies deceived you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Chick.

"Nick Carter did not capture Dazaar."

"But he did. She was dragged from the platform with a lasso——"

"Tush! When you were struggling with Dazaar beneath the platform, the lasso had already caught its victim, over your head."

Chick started, for he realized all at once that this must be true.

"Who, then, was captured?" he demanded. "Do you mean to tell me that Nick Carter was deceived?"

"No; Nick Carter was not deceived—only for the moment—until he looked upon the person he had captured with the lasso. He knew then that he had made a mistake, but it was too late to rectify it. And you were in a swoon at his feet and could not explain, for your blood had drunk of the poison on the pin with which she defended herself. It is a wonder that you did not die, sahib; you alone have lived to tell that a man's blood may drink of that poison and recover; nor would you have recovered——"

"Well? Go on."

"No. Dazaar may tell you that—if she wishes you to know it."

"And Nick, and Ten-Ichi and the others have let me continue to suppose that Dazaar was all this time in prison," mused Chick, aloud.

"Ah! you were too ill to be told the truth. Now you are strong enough to know—strong enough to be taken to her, where you belong."

"Belong? Belong? I do not belong to that fiend."

"Ay; but you do; by all the rites of her religion, which is older and better than your own. She waits for you. She is the half of your duality; you are the half of hers. Only the fulfillment of the compact, or death, can free you now."

"My God!"

* The readers of No. 395 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, entitled "A Compact With Dazaar," will remember that Chick passed through a terrible experience in the Devil Worshipers' den, during which a sacrilegious marriage ceremony was performed between him and Irma Plavatski, who is Dazaar also. The reader will remember, also, that immediately following the ceremony Irma and Chick disappeared together, in the pit under the platform, and that almost instantly Irma was supposed to reappear, and that Nick Carter lassoed her. A few moments later, Chick returned, staggering into the room and falling at Nick's feet. This story will show that Irma did not reappear—that it was *not* Irma whom Nick lassoed, and that Chick only escaped from her arms after a terrific struggle; and to the injuries received in that fight his present illness is due.

"Grach!" hissed Gothmar. "Do you dare?"

"Dare what?"

"To call upon that name. Beware, or my cord will do for you what—tush!"

He turned and motioned to his two followers, whereat they stepped forward until they were beside Chick's chair.

"Take him," he ordered; and Chick felt a sponge thrust against his nostrils, his senses wavered, and, for an instant, he felt as if he were flying through space.

Then all became a blank to him.

CHAPTER II.

THE PALACE OF THE VAMPIRES.

When Chick opened his eyes to consciousness again, he turned them from one side to the other in wonder and amazement; and well he might do so, for it is doubtful if another room like that one existed anywhere in the world—unless in the heart of Thibet.

He could not even conjecture where he was.

Above him, towering loftily, was a dome of glass, cut prismatically, so that the light of the sun in shining through it, took upon its rays a thousand and one shades of color, and, in blending, lent to the room a strange and indescribable glow of atmospheric voluptuousness which somehow got upon the senses and pervaded them with an inexplicable caress.

He was lying upon a wide, low couch as soft as eiderdown, and yet of sufficient resistance so that he did not sink into it unpleasantly.

The clothing he had worn when Gothmar interrupted his solitude in Nick Carter's study had been removed, and in its place he was arrayed from head to foot in garments of glossy, silken fabric as beautiful as it was light and comfortable to the skin.

Shirt, tunic, undergarments, and the long, lazy-robe which covered it, all, were of the same material, the like of which he had never seen before, and he looked down upon it in utter amazement, doubting for the moment if he were not dreaming, and if he had not had a relapse of his illness and thus brought upon himself an interval of dementia.

But a second glance above and around him brought reassurance; for the room—that great, round room with the glass dome over it, and with its strange furnishings and decorations—was startlingly real. The blossoming flowers, strange also, but, nevertheless, beautiful and fragrant, were not fruits of the imagination. The mass of tropical foliage with which the borders of the room were banked; the delicate warmth of the atmosphere, like the touch of a tropical sun cooled to freshness by a passing breeze; the twittering of birds as they hopped from branch to branch, ruffling their feathers and cooing to their mates—birds that were unknown to him, and which did not belong to the climate of his own country; the pleasant hissing of a fountain somewhere beyond his range of vision—all tended to lend to his surroundings a touch of orientalism and unreality which in his weakened physical state almost overcame him.

He wondered for a moment if he were really alive; and then he sought to rise from the divan upon which he was lying.

It was with considerable difficulty that he finally rose to a sitting posture on the edge of the couch; but his head swam so that after a moment he was glad to return to the recumbent attitude.

Lying upon his back, he presently discovered that immediately above his head there was a metal gong suspended, with the hammer for it within easy reach of his hand, and, devoured by curiosity, he struck a sharp blow upon it.

Then, before the echo of the gong had died away, Gothmar appeared beside the couch, as silently and as suddenly as if he had leaped into being out of the stillness of the room.

"At your service, sahib," he said, showing his gleaming teeth and flashing his beady eyes upon the sick man.

"Where the devil did you spring from?" demanded Chick, annoyed that the fellow should appear so suddenly and mysteriously.

"I sprang from an eye-tooth of the great god Siva, from whence all good stranglers come," replied Goth-

mar, imperturbably. "Just now I am delegated to serve you; and, sahib, if you would win my fealty and admiration—nay, my adoration, I pray that you will order me to use my cord upon some human being. Order me to strangle somebody."

"All right," said Chick, boldly. "You will win my eternal gratitude if you will go at once and strangle Dazaar."

Gothmar staggered back as if he had received a blow, and, for an instant, he looked as if he were frightened, for the smile left his face and his eyes looked scared.

Then he leaned forward and whispered tensely:

"For less than what you have said just now, I have strangled many others. Beware, sahib!"

"Did I shock you?" asked Chick, laughing.

"You frightened me. If I had given utterance to such a statement, to such a request, I would have perished instantly—have dropped dead before your eyes."

"Indeed! It is a pity then that you did not say it."

"Grach! Sahib, would you anger me?"

"Yes; if in your fury I could persuade you to strangle yourself—or Dazaar."

"Again! Again!"

"Certainly; as many times as you please, if once would not do the work."

"I wonder that you are alive, sahib. Such words from another would seal his doom at once. There would be no future for him, not even in hades."

"Poor chap! Look here, Gothmar—that is your name, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Where am I? Where is this place to which you have brought me?"

"That I may not tell you."

"Why?"

Gothmar shrugged his shoulders.

"Where is Dazaar?" continued Chick. "Where is this Queen of Hades? Where is Irma Plavatski?"

"She is near—quite near."

"I am her prisoner, then?"

"Her prisoner? No; her consort."

"Gothmar," said Chick, quietly, "do you know what I would do if I had the strength that was mine before I was attacked by this fit of sickness—before I was poisoned by the touch of that pin you told me about? Do you know what I would do to you?"

"No, sahib."

"I'd take that hair cord away from you and wind it around your own villainous neck, and I would laugh while I choked the miserable life out of you."

"And so," replied Gothmar, without a change of expression on his face, "you would send me to Paradise; for that I thank you, sahib."

"What an awful scoundrel you are, Gothmar," said Chick, in disgust.

But Gothmar only smiled, precisely as if Chick had paid him a great compliment.

"I await your orders, sahib," he said, presently.

"Very good; is Dazaar here—in this house, if it is a house?"

"Dazaar is almost within touch of your hand, sahib."

"Indeed! I wish you would ask her to come within reach of my voice, within sight of my eyes."

He closed them wearily for an instant, for the sight of Gothmar angered him; and when he opened them again, he started violently, for Gothmar had disappeared, and in his place, as if one person had changed to the other without moving at all, stood the beautiful Irma Plavatski—the Queen of Hades—Dazaar herself.

If she had been beautiful when Chick had seen her at other times, she was thrice entrancing in her attractiveness now, as she stood over him, looking down upon him where he reclined upon the couch. There was an expression of angelic purity on her features and in her wondrous eyes. Her red lips were parted in a smile, and her teeth glowed like pearls between them. Her cheeks were flushed with the bloom of youth and innocence, and her whole attitude was suggestive of an exact paradox of what she really represented.

"I am here," she said, in a low tone; and at the same time she reached out one of her hands and touched him on the forehead.

Impatiently he shook his head free from the touch;

but she seemed not to notice the act, for she still smiled down upon him indulgently.

"Where is this wonderful palace of yours to which you have brought me, a prisoner?" he asked; "and why have you brought me here at all? For the purposes of torture, I suppose. Is it not so?"

"If you were to ask one question at a time, you would be more assured of satisfactory replies," she responded.

Then she turned and drew a hassock near to the edge of the couch and seated herself upon it.

"As you please," he said. "Where is this place to which you have brought me?"

"It is in the mountains, a day's journey from the city of New York," she replied. "It is a retreat which I directed my agents to purchase for me long ago, when I first invaded this country of yours. And I have had it decorated to please me—to remind me of my own palace among the mountains of Thibet."

"How long have I been here? When was I brought here?"

"You have been here seven days. Gothmar brought you here one week ago, and, since that time, you have been sleeping, while I have been drawing the poison from your veins."

"Good Heaven!" ejaculated Chick.

"You would have died otherwise," she continued. "Nothing could have saved you. You might have lingered for months, but the spells would have returned, and you would have died. Only I could save you."

"Humph!"

"You live because I knew how to save you. You live because I could keep you unconscious while I drew the poisoned blood from your veins and substituted new and healthy blood in its place. You live because——"

"One would think that you were a set of vampires here," he said, scornfully.

"And one might say not far wrong, as you understand the application of that word," she retorted. "It needed the act of what you would call a vampire to save you. We, who worship Satan, honor vampires, because we know how to make use of them."

"Human vampires," he murmured.

"Ay; if you will have it so. We have another word for it, less harsh. In your own case, I have been the vampire; I have saved your life. Have——"

"You!"

"Have you no words of thanks for me?"

"Curses, rather," he growled, shocked almost beyond endurance by the suggestion in her remarks. And her red lips, which a moment before had seemed so beautiful to him, now looked hideous. But she only smiled as she leaned over him with her beautiful eyes, strangely alight, fixed upon his own.

And while he gazed, fascinated with horror, and yet too weak to resist her, she bent down nearer and nearer to him, until he could feel her breath fanning his cheeks and brow.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE TOILS OF A SIREN.

But it was only to touch those same brilliant lips against his brow, for she straightway resumed her former attitude.

"I have frightened you," she said.

"Ay! you have. You do frighten me—and it is a new sensation. I am not accustomed to the feeling."

"I know that; but do not blame yourself. It is due to your condition of weakness and helplessness; a condition that is necessary to my purpose."

"For God's sake tell me what the purpose is, then."

"For God's sake I will tell you nothing; but, for the sake of the devil and his followers, I might tell you much."

"Then in the devil's name tell me. Do not tantalize me."

She smiled brightly when he uttered that expression in his desperation.

"There is hope for you," she said. "I will yet win you over to our cause."

"Not while I live," he retorted.

"Ah! yes I will."

"Do you pretend that you do not know who and what I am?" he asked.

"I know perfectly well who and what you are."

"Last night—no; it was not last night. When was it?"

"When you received the scratch of the pin which put you here?"

"Yes."

"It was two weeks ago. You were a week in the house in New York before I sent Gothman to bring you here; and you have been a week here."

"Very well, then. At that time, when we descended into the pit together, you supposed I was Nick Carter. Do you still think that?"

"Why, no," she smiled. "Why should I think that?"

"But it was Nick Carter whom you pursued; not I."

"It was not Nick Carter with whom I took the oath of duality. Who took that oath with me? It was you."

"Well?"

"We cannot go behind that oath. It is the wedding ceremony of the worshipers of Satan; it was our marriage feast. In the language of your own people you are my husband; I am your wife."

"Never."

She only smiled at his vehemence.

"Your affections must be readily transferable," he sneered. "Then, all your heart, all your love, all your passion was directed toward him—and now——"

"Now you are its object," she said. "Does that seem strange to you? It is strange to me also."

She started from the hassock where she was seated and crossed the room, but only to return again; but Chick could see that she was using all the power there was in her to suppress an emotion which she seemed to wish to conceal; and then, like the sudden rush of a storm, it burst upon him.

"Bah!" she said. "Do you think that I would choose you as against Nick Carter? Do you think that you can fill the place that should have been taken by him? Do you think that I could love you as I would have loved him? Do you think that you are aught to me save the cursed human being with whom, by a fraud of yours and his, I took the oath of duality? I—even I—have no choice now. The oath is taken. It is subscribed. You are mine and I am yours. The devil himself cannot alter that, and I am bound by it, and you are bound by it as firmly as your limbs might be chained together with links of steel. You are as safe from me as Satan himself, for I cannot injure you, but—you are as fast in the toils of duality, and as much my husband, as if a thousand ministers had said the words over us. I hate you for it, although my oath commands me to love you for it."

"And Nick Carter?" asked Chick. "What of him?"

"Nick Carter? He is dead to me, save in that he lives to become a victim of the most awful punishment that I and my followers can devise. I had not believed that I could suffer, and yet, were Nick Carter to undergo all the tortures of a thousand hells, because I sent him there, he would already have had his revenge upon me in what he has made me suffer by this subterfuge, and by the substitution of you for him."

"You're a wonder!" exclaimed Chick. "I don't suppose the devil himself can understand you, can he?"

"At least you cannot," she replied.

"I suppose you have selected a few very pleasant little tortures for me, haven't you?" he asked.

"I have already told you that it is out of my power to injure you now."

"But I don't believe that, you know."

"The only torture that is in store for you is in knowing that you belong to me, and that I am yours."

"And compared to that bit of information," replied Chick, slowly, "hell looks like thirty cents."

"You think so?" she asked, smiling. "It is a pleasure for me to know that, for in that case I will not suffer alone."

"Suffer alone?" cried Chick. "Can anything make you suffer?"

"Yes; your caresses will be torture to me."

"Then, by Heaven, if I had the strength I would pursue you now. If only I could make you suffer a few pangs, I think I would be content to suffer any of them myself; but——"

He paused, and she shook her head.

"You rave," she said, "for you know nothing of the awful power of Satan."

"Don't I?" said Chick.

"No. Let me tell you of some of it."

"Do. I imagine you can tell it well."

"I am beautiful, am I not?"

"Yes; to look upon. As a burning city is beautiful. As a tornado is beautiful—from a distance."

"I know that I am beautiful. The power of Satan makes me so. You hate me now—or you think you do, and it amounts to the same thing. Now listen."

"I am listening."

"You are a prisoner here, and you cannot escape. I am a prisoner here with you, and I may not leave this place again for one year. This room and the room beneath it are your abiding place, and yonder, through that dome, is another like it where my parlor is. Every day we must pass the time together, from morning until night, here or there. We may not be apart at all save when darkness falls and night settles over the earth. Do you comprehend that much?"

"I will at least say that I do; go on."

"Every day, every hour, nay, every minute of the time that passes while Satan wills that we are together, he will make me more and more beautiful. He will transform me into a siren of fascination, and, bit by bit, step by step, you will go mad with love for me, even though you hate me now."

"Well, I won't. You can bet your last dollar on that. I'm immune."

"I would that you were; but you are not. Little by little your strength will return to you, and while it is returning I will administer to you. Ere long you will listen for the sound of my steps when I come to you, and you will dread the moment when I must leave you alone again. It is the work of Satan, and he is a master workman."

"A master workman when he works through a beautiful woman; I will grant you that."

"Does he not always work so? Do you think that you can pit your puny powers of resistance against the power of the devil?"

"I can try; and I can put up a fairly good bluff at it. Thank God I've got time to think while I am gaining strength."

"How many good men have fallen when Satan has sent a beautiful woman to dig the pit in their paths! And you will fall as they have fallen. Do you suppose if a thousand atomizers were spraying opium upon you from behind those flowers, that you could withstand for very long the desire to sleep? You know that you could not. And do you suppose that you, a man, can live here in this atmosphere, with the fragrance of these flowers around you, with the breath of this atmosphere upon you, with the lassitude of this place to corrupt you—do you suppose that you can withstand the fascinations which Satan will compel me to throw around you, the beauty which he will thrust upon you through me, the——"

She paused and threw back her head, laughing.

"You will be as a leaf in a storm," she continued. "You will be as a feather in a gale. You will be as the sand of an hour glass, slipping through as quietly and as surely. You will be as all men are, a weakling, a puppet, a mere tool to make more sure and more positive the handiwork of Satan."

"Blowed if I don't think you are trying to convince me that, although you are bound to make me fall in love with you if you can, you all the while hope that I won't. Eh? Is that the idea?"

She did not reply to him.

She left the hassock and crossed to the flowering plants again, and stood there with one of the blossoms pressed against her nostrils.

Then she turned and slowly retraced her steps until she was standing again over him.

And, looking up, he saw that her eyes were burning into his; that her lips were parted in a smile that had not been there before—those brilliant, red lips which suggested the vampire of legend to his imagination; and he shuddered.

And then she began to sink down nearer to him. Nearer and yet nearer, her hands resting upon his shoulders, and her face just above his own.

He wondered in that instant if she were indeed a human vampire, and if he had been preserved until that moment in order to gratify her awful appetite for

blood, and then he remembered that in his weakened condition there could be very little blood in his veins.

But all the while her face sank nearer to his own.

And all the while he could feel her breath hotter and hotter against his cheek; and then she seemed to collapse upon him, against him. Her face pressed against his. Her lips touched his, and he started, almost in terror, struggling to force her away from him.

And then he could hear no more.

He fainted into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROUTE THE STRANGLERS TOOK.

It was late in the evening of the day when Gothmar and the two men with him forcibly took Chick from the detective's house, when Nick Carter returned to it, and he was alone when he did arrive.

He had felt some misgiving about leaving Chick when he had gone out on business which would not admit of delay, but there was an electric button within reach of the assistant's hand and a maid to wait upon his every wish, and Chick himself had assured him that he was perfectly able to be left alone.

However, when Nick let himself into the house, he was immediately impressed with a sense of unusual silence about the place, and he went at once to the room where Chick had been seated near the window—his own study.

As we know, Chick was not there, and the detective, supposing for an instant that his assistant had asked to return to his bed, went at once into the adjoining room which had been prepared for his use.

But the bed was untouched.

He knew then, of course, that something of an unusual nature had happened.

To ring for the maid without first investigating the appearance of things on his own account he knew to be useless, for if the maid had been cognizant of any information in the usual course of things, she would have been the first to meet him at the door and to acquaint him with it.

Returning to the study, he crossed to the chair where Chick had been seated and picked up the book, now fallen to the floor, that had rested upon his knees when Gothmar entered the room.

It will be remembered that Chick had been gazing out of the window at the gathering shadows when he was interrupted, and that a book rested upon his knees.

Fortunately, the article that had been used by him for a bookmark was a short piece of pencil, and Chick, long trained by Nick Carter in the uses of adversity—and particularly that kind of adversity which came with their calling—had managed to make diligent use of the pencil.

Scribbled at random on the pages of the book, and almost illegible by reason of the difficulties under which they were written, were many words and names, and they were put down in a haphazard fashion without regard to sequence of meaning at all.

Nick seated himself in the chair and held the book before him.

"Poor old Chick!" he murmured. "Weak as he was, he managed to write these words here for me to piece together. Now let me see if I can get exactly at his meaning."

The words, as they appeared consecutively—and they were scattered over many pages of the book, as if the leaves had been inadvertently turned while he was talking with his captors—were as follows:

"Hindu . . . three . . . two door . . . Gothmar . . . strangler . . . cord . . . hum. hair . . . maid . . . murder . . . choked . . . Dazaar . . . free . . . Irma . . . husband . . . sent for . . . poisoned . . . take me . . . strangle you . . . carriage . . . life . . . no danger . . . yourself . . . great . . . danger . . . darkness . . . daylight . . . that's all . . . drop book . . . find it."

Such was the message which Chick had left behind him, written in the book which had slipped to the floor after he had finished writing it; and which he had evidently written at the time he was talking to the strangler.

And there was that in it which aroused the detective to immediate action in another way, and that was the reference to the maid and to murder.

It had not occurred to him before that the men who had attacked Chick might have done violence in the house before they took him away with them; but now he thought how probable it was that they had done that very thing.

He dropped the book and hastened down the stairs and on through the lower floor to the basement.

Nothing had happened there, only the maid who should have attended upon Chick was not there.

Returning to the parlor floor, he entered the library, and there, lying back in one of the easy-chairs and breathing heavily, as if she had just recovered consciousness, he discovered her.

The story she told was incoherent, but reduced to a few words it related simply that she had unexpectedly come face to face with a strange, dark man on the stairs, and that she had been so frightened that she fainted. More than that she did not remember, save that when consciousness did return to her her neck was very sore and lame, and felt as if somebody had choked her, and there was a dark-purple mark all the way around her throat.

And we, who know that Gothmar told Chick he had strangled the maid in the hall, will also know that only the fact that she fainted saved her life.

There was no breath in her body to choke out of it when the terrible cord was thrown around her throat, and so, when the strangler removed it, there was really no harm done at all.

Having reassured her, Nick returned to his study, and once more took up the message Chick had so strangely left for him.

He copied the words he found there on a large sheet of paper, one by one, and in the order in which it seemed to him that they should appear for coherency of expression, and then with words which he substituted himself he began to fill in the blank spaces between them.

This work occupied him for a long time, for he had to make many erasures and many changes before he could make the message read as he believed Chick had intended it to do.

But, at last, after much labor, he produced the following—and the reader is requested to compare this production with the original in order to realize what it was that the detective accomplished. The words written in the book by Chick appear in capitals, and those supplied by Nick, in his translation, are in small letters —thus:

"A HINDU has appeared in the room without warning. There are THREE of them in all, and TWO remain near the DOOR, while the other one approaches —or attacks —me. His name is GOTHMAR. He is a STRANGLER. I know that by the CORD of HUMAN HAIR he carries. The MAID has been MURDER-ed by him; CHOKED to death by the cord. This man is sent by DAZAAR, who is FREE, and not a prisoner as you led me to believe. IRMA claims me for her HUSBAND, and has SENT FOR me. I have been so ill because I was POISONED by that pin with which I was stabbed in the struggle with Irma at the pit under the platform.* These men are to TAKE ME to her, and afterward they will return to STRANGLE YOU. They have a CARRIAGE waiting. I think MY LIFE is in NO DANGER, but you are YOURSELF in GREAT DANGER. The time now is just between DARKNESS and DAYLIGHT. I must DROP the BOOK now so that you will—or they will not—FIND IT."

It will be seen by this that out of the thirty-eight rather disjointed words which the assistant had managed to scribble with his weak hand, Nick Carter was enabled to construct a fairly coherent message; and it will be seen also that in doing so he had arrived at the correct story of what had occurred in that room.

He knew that Chick had written down a word for everything he was told or could know from the men who attacked him.

He knew also that Chick would have asked them where they intended to take him, and that, if he had been told, he would have added a word as to his destination, to the others in the book.

But there was no such word there.

* See No. 395 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

All that Chick had been told was that Irma had sent for him: that he was to be taken to her; that according to the ceremony of duality she looked upon him as her husband, and he asked himself:

"Has she transferred her affections from me to Chick, or is there something in the rites of their ceremony of duality which compels her to take him instead of me, now that their heathenish ceremony has been performed, and that Chick was the principal with her?"

We already have the answer to that question; but Nick Carter had not.

Yet, in referring back again to his interpretation of the message from Chick, he quoted:

"'They will return to strangle you:' and 'you are yourself in great danger.'"

"That would seem to settle the point," he mused. "Chick regards his own life as in no danger, although they have taken him away from here a captive, and, not long ago, to be a captive in the hands of Dazaar meant torture and death."

He left the chair then and began a close inspection of the room.

"This door into the hall was open," he mused, "and yet Chick did not hear a sound until they were in the room. Those fellows always tread silently, but they must have been mighty still in this silent house not to have made a noise which would have reached the ears of Chick. They would not go in their bare feet in this country, and they would not wear rubber on their feet, for it is against the rules of their sect to touch rubber. They would have felt soles to their shoes, of course, and—well, something should have clung to one of them to be dropped here."

He lighted every bulb in the room and began an eager search of the carpet.

Between the chair at the window and the door, he picked up from the floor these articles:

The half of a yellow, half-dried pine needle.

Two bits of heavy, yellow paper, not larger than the head of an upholsterer's tack and shaped like the ace of clubs.

An infinitesimal particle of rotten wood not larger than the head of a pin.

A long, black hair, evidently from the tail of a horse.

After he had discovered these things he procured his powerful magnifying glass and began again, for already he felt that he was getting on the trail in a way he had not dared to hope to do, and there was one article which he now hoped to find which he was not likely to discover save by an exceedingly careful and painstaking search.

"It would be strange," he mused, "if I should discover in this room the locality of the place they were so careful to conceal from Chick. The trail is getting warm, at least."

Then he bent with renewed zeal to the search, and added to the list above, he presently put down these articles:

Half a dozen cinders, such as would be thrown out by a locomotive burning coal.

Two small cinders from burning wood.

A little speck of coal ashes.

Two small particles of clay, one yellow and the other blue.

Half a dozen grains of white sand.

Another bit of yellow paper, this time shaped like a diamond.

This last was on the stairs outside the room, and, farther down, almost to the bottom, there was a bit of white paper, thick and heavy, and this was in the shape of a crescent.

On the floor in front of the door, which opened upon the street, he found two hairs, which, upon close inspection, he decided must have grown upon the mane of a St. Bernard dog, for there is no other animal which has hair like them, and outside on the steps was the last find of all, for it was the tip of a feather from the wing of a crow.

With this strange assortment of articles in his possession, he returned to the study, and there he arranged them upon a broad sheet of white paper before him.

His first act was to push the bits of paper to one side.

"These have been puzzled from railway tickets," he mused aloud, for he was alone, and he would concen-

trate his mind on the work in hand much better if he talked to himself while he arranged and classified the articles before him, "which shows that the men must have traveled on the cars to get here. Some of the particles punched from their tickets clung to their clothing, and, fortunately, they have dropped enough of them here to give me a most excellent clew.

"I know, for example, that their yellow tickets were punched by at least two conductors, which shows that they traveled some distance, and I know, by the bit that was punched from a white ticket, that not only was that done by another conductor, but that it was on a different train and a different road as well; and, more than that, it was a road under a different management from the other, else they would have purchased their tickets all the way through in the first place, and they would have been of the same color.

"Now, the yellow tickets were punched by conductors who have punches shaped like a club and a diamond; and the white ticket by one whose punch was shaped like a crescent.

"I think that gives me a pretty good clew, for, as soon as morning comes, I can go to one railroad office after another and ask for their returned-ticket department. It won't take me long then to get on the track of the right spot, for in every returned-ticket department I happen to know that there is a record of every punch that ever comes under their observation.

"Chick, old fellow, I'll know pretty nearly where you are before another sun sets, as sure as my name is Nick Carter."

CHAPTER V.

THE DETECTIVE ON THE TRAIL.

"Now let me see," continued the detective. "Let me touch upon each article I found—a little lightly at first perhaps, and to be dwelt upon more at length later if necessary.

"The pine needle tells me what? Why, if it were a green pine needle it would not tell me anything at all, for the reason that it might have been picked up almost anywhere. Such things are sometimes brought into the city by excursionists, and might even be dropped in a street car. But this is a dried one—a pine needle that is a season or more old. There is a little touch of pitch attached to it also, showing that it must have lain on the ground in close proximity to a cone; and that touch of pitch is what made it cling to the felt sole of the shoe on one of those stranglers.

"Being a yellow and dried pine needle, it was picked up by that foot where it fell from the tree, and that was, of course, in the country.

"Here is the bit of rotten wood. By its looks it was torn from a stump by a person's clothing brushing against it as he passed, so I will conjecture that these men passed through a piece of pine woods when they started for New York.

"Now, wherever the place from which they started may be located, I will wager that they keep a St. Bernard dog or two, and that one of those dogs was caressed by one of the men who came here after Chick, and just as they were on the point of starting out on their journey. The dog's hairs seem to prove that much.

"There are crows around the house where they stay, too, and one of the men admires crows' feathers, for he has worn one of them, or a piece of one; which fate willed that he should drop here on my doorstep in order that I might know about his tastes. Crows' feathers do not grow in the city. Once in a great while one may be found in the park, but such occasions are rare.

"Now, when they left the house to start for the city, they were obliged to drive to the railway station. The horsehair suggests that; and so do the grains of white sand, which appear to me to have been thrown upon the clothing by the turning of a wheel, and to have clung unseen to the back of a coat until it was dislodged because the man who wore it leaned against the jamb of this door under which I discovered it.

"Then we have the yellow clay and the blue clay. Now yellow and blue clay do not, as a rule, mix. They are not found in the same clay bank. Neither are they found along the roadbed of a railroad which is well ballasted. But, in crossing a ditch near a railroad,

the blue clay might have been picked up, and in climbing up on the grade to cross the road to an unimportant station, the yellow clay might easily have been encountered. At least, all these things taken together smell strongly of the country.

"The coal ashes also suggest the vicinity of a country station, but that is more strongly supported by the presence of the wood cinders; for wood is not burned on locomotives these days, unless that locomotive happens to pass through a country where time is no object, and where wood is very much cheaper than coal.

"That could only be true in certain remote parts of this State, in some parts of Pennsylvania, or in northern New England.

"Now it isn't at all likely that they came from a remote part of New England, nor yet from as far away as Pennsylvania; so it is only reasonable to suppose that they did come from the northern part of New York.

"Next, we have the coal cinders, and they fit in with the punchings from the railroad tickets.

"That white punching, shaped like a crescent, came from a single cardboard ticket issued between two stations. I know that, because the paper is too heavy for a folding ticket, such as are detached at different parts of the route by the conductors as they pass the respective stations; but the yellow punchings tell a different story.

"They are from thinner paper, showing that they were punched from a coupon ticket; and a coupon ticket—supposing our men came in by the Hudson River road—must have been issued from a station above Albany or Troy, surely. Say above Saratoga; that would account for the two different punches in the yellow ticket, the club and the diamond.

"That Hudson River idea is not a bad one, and is more than likely to be correct.

"Now what does it tell me, if it is correct?

"Why, I find that my stranglers came from some place above Albany; that they drove some distance to a station before they took the train; that they drove to the station from the direction opposite the side upon which the station itself is located, since they had to cross the track to pick up that clay; that they bought white tickets from that station to the end of that road, and that that particular road is not a part of the Hudson River system; and that it uses wood for fuel.

"I find then that they changed cars, and bought yellow tickets, but that they were some distance above Albany, because if they had been as far south as Albany or Troy, a single and not a coupon ticket to New York would have been issued.

"Now, it will be an easy matter for me to apply to Mr. Daniels in the morning, and, through him, to learn very quickly about those punches; but, in the meantime, in order to assure myself that Daniels is the right man to go to, I might pick up a little information about the carriage that brought the stranglers to my door."

Nick felt that there was nothing more to be accomplished that night in the dark; but as soon as daylight was an established fact the following morning, he was astir, intent upon losing no time in tracing the whereabouts of his chief assistant—but, more than all, determined to leave no stone unturned which would lessen the interval of time which stood between Dazaar and a prison cell or the electric chair.

With the aid of daylight, he made a second examination of the floor of the house wherever the intruders might have lingered even for a moment, but beyond the several articles already in his possession as described, he discovered nothing.

Next he gave his attention to the outside of the house between the front door and the curbstone, where the carriage waited, while the stranglers went into the house to secure their victim.

But, although he searched diligently, he discovered only one article which might have a bearing upon the case, and that was a book of cigarette papers which had been dropped in the gutter directly in front of his door.

The only interesting feature of the book of cigarette papers was the fact that it bore the paster of a tobacconist, whose place of business was on Forty-second Street directly opposite the Grand Central Station.

"It stands to reason," mused the detective, "that there are thousands of men and boys in the city of New York, any one of whom might have dropped the

look where I found it, but it is also reasonable to suppose that it was lost by one of the men who came here after Chick—lost while they were bringing him out of the house—crowded out of the man's pocket while they were lifting him into the carriage. At all events, I will make my first railroad call upon Mr. Daniels."

The detective arrived at the office of the general passenger agent of the Hudson River road at nine o'clock, and found that Mr. Daniels had just come in—and he was, of course, received at once.

"How are you, Mr. Carter?" exclaimed that most genial of men, extending his hand with great cordiality. "I see a whole basketfull of interrogation points in your eyes this morning. What can I do for you?"

"I want to ask you a few questions about some punches," replied Nick, with his mind entirely upon the question in hand.

"Punches, eh? Going to enter the prize ring?" asked Mr. Daniels.

"Well, hardly that. I refer to ticket punches, sir."

"Oh: I see. Not the solar plexus, eh?"

"It might amount to that for a certain individual, a little later on," returned Nick.

"Well, what is it you wish to know?"

"This: Yesterday, three men came into town, as I have reason to believe, from the North. They forgot to mention where they came from or where they were going, but they left these little things behind them, and I thought you might help me to determine where they originated."

As Nick spoke, he placed the bits of paper punched from the tickets on the desk in front of Mr. Daniels.

CHAPTER VI.

DAZAAR'S CASTLE IN THE FOREST.

"Certainly," replied the general passenger agent, with an instant of hesitation. "Nothing could be easier." Then he turned to one of his clerks and added:

"Collins, ask Mr. Lewis to step here a moment, from the passenger auditor's department—the returned-ticket department." And then, while they awaited the arrival of Mr. Lewis, he said to Nick:

"Has there been a crime committed up the road somewhere?"

"No; but there is likely to be one or more, if the fellows, who carried the tickets from which these bits of paper were punched, remain long in the neighborhood."

"Indeed! Bad eggs, eh?"

"Indian stranglers," replied Nick.

"Stranglers! Well, that is a new one on me. But here is Lewis. He'll soon tell you what you wish to know. Eh, Lewis?"

"I'll try," replied Mr. Lewis. "What is it?"

"Can you locate these punches?" asked Nick, pointing to them, where they were laid, upon a sheet of white paper, in front of them.

"I tell Lewis, sometimes, when I want to please him," said Mr. Daniels, with a smile, "that I believe he knows every conductor's punch between Maine and California."

"Well, I do know a great many of them," rejoined Mr. Lewis, modestly. "It is my business to know all that are connected with our road and its connections, and, naturally, from seeing them and studying them constantly, I learn a great many more."

"And do you know these, for example?" asked Nick.

"Perfectly," replied the superintendent of the returned-ticket office.

"Good! Would you mind telling me about them?"

Mr. Lewis glanced at Mr. Daniels for permission to give the desired information.

"Give Mr. Carter all the information he asks for," said Mr. Daniels.

"Very well," responded Lewis. "That diamond-shaped punch was made by a conductor named Simmons, who brings the early morning train out of North River, every day in the year, except Sundays."

"And where is North River?"

"Up near the head waters of the Hudson; about a hundred and thirty or forty miles north of Albany.

The club punches were made between Albany and New York, and, in order to make a continuous trip of it, there should be two other punch marks—an X and a spade."

"Good! My friends neglected to drop the X and the spade where I could find them, but I have no doubt that the punches were made in their tickets. Now about this crescent. What do you make of that?"

"It came from a little, narrow-gauge railroad up in that region; a road about sixteen miles long, I think it is. It hasn't any particular reasons for existing, save for hauling lumber. It is individual property, owned by a lumber man in that region, and they have no regular time-table on the road. It is called Gregory's Road."

"I see; and is only sixteen miles long, you say?"

"Yes."

"Their locomotives burn wood for fuel?"

"Yes; of course. Slabs taken from Gregory's mills. They cost them nothing."

"Where is the northern terminus of this road?"

"Why, the mills. They are up in the mountains, almost due north from North River. The road, I think, follows the course of the Boreas River, and the mills should be somewhere in the neighborhood of Boreas Pond."

"Is it a wild country up there, Mr. Lewis?"

"About the wildest there is in that part of the Adirondacks."

"Have you ever been up there?"

"Why, yes. I went through there several years ago while on my vacation."

"Is there a hotel or a hunting lodge of any pretension in that locality?"

"No; but there is a strange sort of a building situated down in a cup in the mountains, which was built many years ago by a rich man, who wanted to live the remainder of his life as a hermit. He did live there, and died there. Since that time the place has gone to ruin, I believe. It is called Peter's Castle."

"Why called that?"

"Well, Peter was the rich man's first name. Nobody ever did know his last name; and the house looks like a castle, with its towers and a big dome in the center of it."

"How far is it from Boreas Pond?"

"Not far. I don't remember exactly."

"Do I understand you that nobody seemed to own the property after old Peter died?"

"Yes; that's the idea."

"And it has been, up to the time you know about, deserted since then?"

"Yes."

"More than likely that is the very place I am looking for."

"It won't be difficult to find in that case, for everybody within a radius of twenty miles around there can tell you how to find Peter's Castle."

"Do you know anybody around that region who is thoroughly trustworthy, who would act as a guide for me, if I paid well for the service?"

"Sure I do. I've got a cousin—that is, a sort of third or fourth cousin—who lives not far from there. He's a kind of backwoodsman. That is how I happened to be there myself. I went there to visit him."

"What is his name?"

"James Douglass. They call him Black Douglass around there, because he is as dark as an Indian."

"Can you give me a note of introduction to him?"

"Sure I can."

"And direct me so that I will have no difficulty in finding him?"

"Easily. I can wire to North River to have him meet you there."

"No; I prefer to find him myself. I don't care to publish the fact that I intend to visit that country just at this time."

"All right, sir. Is that all you want of me?"

"Yes; if you will prepare the letter and the directions for me."

"I'll bring them to you in twenty minutes; or, if Mr. Daniels is willing, I will write them right here."

"Do so."

Mr. Lewis seated himself at a vacant desk and began his preparation of the letter and the directions.

"What is it all about, Nick?" asked Mr. Daniels.

"Did you ever happen to hear of Dazaar?" asked the detective.

"Well, I should say I had."

"Unless I am greatly mistaken, Dazaar is at the present moment a resident of Peter's Castle."

"And you are going there after him?"

"After her."

"You don't mean to say that Dazaar is a woman?"

"Yes; Dazaar is a woman—at present."

"What do you mean by 'at present'? She can't change her sex, can she?"

"No; I don't suppose she can; but she claims to have been a man about a thousand years of time before she became a woman."

"You don't expect me to swallow that, do you?"

"Certainly not. In my opinion she is neither man nor woman; she is just a plain fiend."

"Either a man or a woman can be that, eh?"

"They might try. This particular person seems to have accomplished it to perfection."

"Good-looking?"

"Yes; just as the lake of sulphur at the bottom of the crater of Popocatapetl is beautiful at a distance."

"Hum! Not bad that. Ah! Lewis, you have the letter ready, I see."

"Yes; here it is."

The letter, with full written directions accompanying it, were handed over to the detective, and, after thanking both gentlemen for the assistance they had given him, he took his leave.

"That is done," he said to himself, when he was again in the street. "To-morrow morning, unless I greatly err, I shall be in the neighborhood of Peter's Castle."

Arrived at his home, he called his assistants to his study.

"Now, attention, lads," he said to them. "We leave on the two o'clock train this afternoon, for a place called North River, among the foothills of the Adirondacks. I want you all to go with me, and, unless I am greatly mistaken, there will be some hot work for all of us before we return. Ten-Ichi, I want you, and Patsy, and Pommery to fix yourselves so that you will represent my sons. I'll engage to look old enough to be the father of all of you. We're going for a little outing in the woods, and I have already engaged a guide, that is, I will have no difficulty in finding one when we get there; and, now, boys——"

"Yes, sir."

"We are going on a piece of desperate work."

"No worse than we had in Russia, was it, chief?" asked Pommery, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes; a thousand times worse and more dangerous."

"Good," said Pommery.

"Dazaar is there. I have no idea how many followers she may have with her, but I do know of three Hindu stranglers. We leave the Grand Central Station at two o'clock; I want you to be ready to start away from the house at half-past two."

And thus it was that on the morning following the day on which Chick was taken away from Nick Carter's house, the detective had already discovered approximately to what place he had been taken; and yet we have just seen that Dazaar told Chick that a week had elapsed while he was still unconscious.

But a week had not elapsed. In reality only two days had gone by when Chick opened his eyes in the orientally appointed apartment where he had the interview with Dazaar.

Doubtless she had her own reasons for wishing him to believe that he had been in her power a longer time than he really had been. She wished him to think that she had hidden him away beyond the reach of Nick Carter.

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK DOUGLASS AND THE CABIN IN THE WOODS.

It was just after dark in the evening of the day following the interview between Nick Carter and the railroad officials, when the detective, accompanied by Ten-Ichi, Patsy and Pommery, left the train at a little station a mile and a half this side of the terminus of the narrow-gauge railroad which the superintendent of the returned-ticket department of the N. Y. C. & H. R. R. R. had described.

In other words, they left the train on the little narrow gauge road before it arrived at Gregory's Mills, for the directions supplied to the detective by Mr. Lewis had contained the information that Black Douglass lived about two miles this side of that point.

The conductor had been made to believe that the passengers who left the train at a station which stood alone in the woods where there was no house of any kind within a mile of it were perfectly familiar with the country, and he had not thought it strange that a gentleman with his three sons should be intent upon taking a vacation by themselves in the heart of the woods, for it was at a season of the year when such a thing was to be expected, although it was rarely that tourists came to that particular section.

The four stood upon the narrow platform and watched the diminutive train as it drew slowly out of sight in the darkness, and then Nick turned with a laugh to his companions.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked, speaking generally.

"Looks exciting," commented Pommery. "Reminds me of Park Row; it's so different."

"Everything closes at sundown here, doesn't it?" said Patsy, with a grin. "Must have a new police commissioner who knows how to keep the lid down."

"The cool air and the mountains suggest Thibet," remarked Ten Ichi, sententiously.

"I think you will find more than that which is suggestive of Thibet, before we take the train on the back track," said Nick. "Now, lads, the place and the man I wish to find before I do anything else, is not very far from here; about a mile, perhaps, and off here to the eastward. The point is, do you want to camp out here till morning and wait for me, or do you wish to go with me to find it?"

"I reckon we'll mosey along if it is all the same to you," suggested Pommery. "I'm not afraid of all the ghosts in Baxter and Doyers Street, after midnight, but I'll confess that this silence and the whispering of the pines gets on my nerves."

"All right," responded Nick. "Stand where you are a moment while I take a look around."

He pressed the button of his electric searchlight and commenced a careful examination of the platform and the ground surrounding it, stepping off the boards and crossing the tracks before he was through.

After fifteen minutes passed in this way he returned to where the others were awaiting him, and there was a satisfied smile upon his face as he said:

"It is always pleasant, after you have worked out a problem, to try it from the other end and prove it; eh?"

"Sure," responded Pommery. "That's what I told Tad, the sweeper, when I punched him in the nose and then kicked him across the street afterward."

"There is a bank of blue clay through this section, I find," continued Nick; "and on the roadbed, in dumping earth to fill in for the reception of the rails, there has been some yellow clay mixed with the gravel and sand. There are also some well-defined footprints in the clay across the track. This is all very satisfactory, my lads, because it assures me that I was correct in the deductions I made. Now, are you ready?"

"All ready, sir."

"Then come ahead. I don't think we will have any difficulty in finding the place we are looking for.

"There is a path through the woods," he continued, recalling the directions which Lewis had written down for him, "which leads directly to Douglass' cabin. Douglass lives there alone with his dogs and his guns, and if we shout 'Douglass!' with all our strength when we are in sight of the cabin, perhaps he will get outside in time to keep the dogs from eating us alive."

"How kind of him!" murmured Pommery.

Nick experienced no difficulty in finding the cabin of Black Douglass, for the path led directly to it; nor were they attacked by the dogs, for in reply to the first shout they gave, Douglass appeared at the door of the cabin with a candle in his hand and peered out through the darkness.

"Who is there?" he called.

"A friend of Bill Lewis, in New York," replied Nick.

"Bully for you and bully for Bill! Come in," called

Douglass, in return; and Nick, followed by his three assistants, entered the cabin.

"Any more of you anywhere around?" asked Douglass.

"No," replied Nick, laughing and extending his hand. "This is the outfit."

"All the kids you've got, sir?"

"All I have with me at present," rejoined Nick.

"Likely looking kids. I guess I can give them a shakedown somewhere. Bill Lewis sent you here, did he?"

"Yes; read this letter: it will tell you all about it," and Nick extended the letter toward him.

"Suppose you read it aloud, will you? I ran away from school yesterday, and my glasses is busted."

"All right. Listen: 'Dear Jim——'"

"That's right. He's the only person on top of earth who ever calls me Jim. What's the rest of it?"

"'This gentleman is a friend of mine and a friend of my boss,'" continued Nick, reading. "'He's all right and he wants to hire your services. He'll pay well for them. If you'll use him just the same as you would use me, I'll be eternally grateful. Bill.'"

"Correct, sir. Now, what's your name?"

"Nick Carter."

"Well, that's a good name enough, Nick. People around here call me Doug, when they don't call me Block. Either will do; one as well as the other. You're welcome. Have you had your supper?"

"Not a bite."

"Then I'll fry you a hunk of venison while we talk. What do you want to do? Hunt?"

"Yes; but not exactly the sort of hunting you are used to."

"No? Well, I'm used to most kinds. What particular sort of hunting do you want to do, anyhow?"

"I'll tell you about that presently. The first thing I want to do is to make terms with you, and I propose to make my own terms. For every day that you serve me you will receive, when I go away, ten dollars."

"Eh? What's that? Ten dollars for every day?"

"Yes."

"Gosh! How long do you expect to stay?"

"Several days. I can't tell just how long. I will stay until my work is finished."

"Well, you can stay a year, at that rate. I should have asked you two dollars a day, and considered myself well paid at that. Won't you go right on talking? I can be getting the supper while you talk, and you've got a way of saying things which I like to hear. I ain't heard anybody talk so pleasant since I can remember."

"How far is Peter's Castle from here?" asked Nick abruptly.

Douglass paused with the frying pan in mid air and looked long and intently at Nick Carter, and then, in a voice that was strangely altered, he replied:

"Five or six miles."

"Is anybody living there now?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"How many persons are living there?"

"I don't know."

"Well, about how many?"

"Might be three or four, might be a dozen, might be half a hundred, for all I know."

"You don't seem to be very enthusiastic about Peter's Castle?"

"Well, mister, I ain't, if anybody should happen to wake you up in the night and ask you about it."

"What is the matter with the place?"

"Nothing, as I know of. I ain't never heard that it had chills and fever or the dumb ague or the measles."

"Well, what is the matter with the people who live there?"

"I ain't axed 'em, and consequently, I don't know. They're a queer lot, and I'll confess that when you axed me about 'em just now, if you had said you wanted to go there with your kids, I'd a told you to keep right along, right now, cause I ain't got any room under my roof and fig tree for any sort of animile that consorts with that crowd. What I don't know about 'em would fill a dictionary; and what I do know about 'em ain't any to their good."

"Suppose you tell me what you do know about them."

"It's mighty little. Peter's Castle hadn't had any habitants till they came here."

"When was that?"

"Between two and three years ago."

"So long ago as that?"

"That's what I said."

"And who came then?"

"Why, a lot of foreign niggers, I call 'em. Straight-haired niggers, and I ain't got no sort of use for a straight-haired nigger. The kinkier his wool is the better I like him. I didn't know that there was anybody there at all till I was out hunting one day and stopped at the spring up there for a drink. Then I saw some of 'em—and from that time on I've seen more and more of them from time to time, till I reckon I've seen a hundred."

"And do you think there are as many people as that there now?"

"No, I don't. I don't suppose there are more than a dozen or so, as a matter of fact; but there are others who are coming and going all the time, and in my opinion, they ain't any good. They're up to some deviltry of some kind, as sure as shooting."

"Well, Douglass, I think you are right about that, and it is what I came here to discover—just what that deviltry is—and I want you to help me find it out," said Nick.

CHAPTER VIII.

GETTING READY FOR THE ATTACK.

Nothing more was said about the expedition until the supper was cleared away and Douglass had lighted his pipe. Then Nick reopened the conversation.

"You say it was more than three years ago when you first noticed strangers at Peter's Castle?" he asked.

"Yes; two years and a half, or such a matter."

"And the people you saw then seemed to be foreigners?"

"Most of them. There were some who didn't look like foreigners."

"What did they seem to be doing there; and what do they seem to be doing there now?"

"Well, as near as I can make out they seem to be mightily busy doing nothing at all."

"And since that time others have been coming and going all the while, eh?"

"Purty near all the while; except in the winter when the snow is too deep for them to do much traveling in these parts."

"Do they come by the railroad?"

"No; only a few of them do that. They seem to drive in from somewhere. I ain't never took the trouble to trail 'em, so I don't know where they do come from, but it wouldn't take long to find out. They didn't bring their stuff in on the railroad; they carted it in."

"What stuff?"

"Blowed if I know; furniture and such, I suppose. I should think, all in all, they had more than a dozen carloads of it."

"Have you ever happened to see a beautiful woman among the people who are there or have been there in the past?"

"Have I? Well, I should say! I was waiting for that question. She's the queen bee in that swarm—you hear me! She's boss, and don't you forgit it!"

"How do you know?"

"Well, I've got eyes—and I've got ears—and I've got sense—and I've got human understanding as well as a man's appreciation of what a beautiful woman can do if she has a mind to do it. I don't suppose there is a man living who could be around where there is a beautiful woman like that one, without letting her boss him. I wouldn't give much for a man who wouldn't. Say! she could boss me from now till kingdom come, if she'd—— No, she couldn't neither, by gosh!"

"Is she there now?"

"I guess she is. She came up on the train about a week ago, or a leetle more."

"You saw her, did you?"

"Saw her! Yes, and I've been seeing her ever since. Can't see nothing else but her, no matter which way I

luck. I happened to be at the station when she arrived, and she was all alone, so I toted her satchel up to the castle for her, feeling like a fool cause I done it. But, Lord! I couldn't help it, when she looked at me and asked me to do it. I just had to."

"Have you been there since?"

"Nope."

"Seen anybody from there, since?"

"Yes; twice."

"Who?"

"Three of them niggers I spoke about, with straight hair, you know, came down and took the train day before yesterday morning; and yesterday they came back on the same train you came on to-night."

"And they brought a fourth man back with them, didn't they?"

"They did."

"Were you at the station when they arrived?"

"Not exactly. I was near there when the train stopped. I saw them get off, but they didn't see me."

"What did the fourth man look like?"

"I couldn't tell very well, except that he was almost black, like the rest of them—and he was a sick man, too, for they had him on a cot."

"Ah! They had blacked his face to make people think he was one of themselves."

"Is that so? Maybe you know already who it was they brought with them."

"I do."

"Maybe that is why you are here."

"That's about the idea, Douglass."

"And maybe he didn't want to come, and you didn't want him to come, and you are going to take him back again without asking anybody's permission. Is that the game?"

"That is part of the game, Douglass; but only a part of it."

"Well, if I am going to work for you, would you mind telling me the rest of it?"

"Not a bit."

"Then let's hear it."

"The people in that house you call Peter's Castle are a set of outlaws. I am convinced since I have talked to you that they have made this place their headquarters ever since they have been in this country. They are not robbers, they are murderers, and the beautiful woman you saw is the worst one in the lot."

"You don't say so!"

"It is true. The man you saw them bring here on a stretcher is a friend of mine whom they abducted, and whom, when they are through with him, they intend to kill if he is not rescued in the meantime."

"Comfortable sort of an outfit, ain't it?"

"Now, Douglass, it is my business not only to rescue my friend, but to capture that pretty woman and as many of her followers as I can."

"I see."

"I want to break up the gang so thoroughly and entirely, that it will never take root again—and I want you to help me do it."

"Well, sir, I guess Black Douglass can do that."

"It will be necessary," continued Nick, "for me to keep rather in the dark for a day or so while I study the ground. I don't think my friend is in any immediate danger, and a few days more or less will not interfere with my work or his condition. On the contrary, he may be stronger and better for waiting, for he has been very ill, and after the journey here, he ought to rest. However, Douglass, I don't intend that he shall be obliged to travel back to New York right away."

"Why so? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I'm going to exterminate that gang so completely that there won't be another one of your

straight-haired niggers left in this locality to bother ——— molest him."

"Bully! That's the way to talk. Partner, you're all right. Shake!"

They shook hands solemnly.

"Now, what's the orders, Mr. Carter?"

"We —these lads and myself—will lay low here to-morrow, in your cabin, while you do some reconnoitering for me."

"Correct. I can do that to the queen's taste."

"I'll get off this disguise—which I only desired for use on the way here, and the boys will step out of theirs."

"What's that? Get off what? Step out of what?"

"These disguises;" and Nick, by way of a practical demonstration, pulled the wig and the mutton-chop whiskers from his head and face, while his assistants at the same time divested themselves of wigs, etc.; and all the time Douglass looked on in utter amazement.

"Bully!" he said. "You are detectives, ain't you?"

"Yes; I am Nick Carter, and these are three of my assistants. The prisoner up at Peter's Castle is another assistant of mine. Haven't you ever heard of Nick Carter?"

"Can't say as I have, sir. You see, I don't read nothing, because I don't know how; and I am so far back in the woods that I don't hear no news to speak of, ever. But it don't make no difference who you are as long as you are Bill Lewis' friend. Now, go ahead with them orders."

"I haven't many more orders to give till I know more about the lay of the land."

"Well, I'll do the knowing of the lay of the land. You just let me do the seeing for you. Tell me what it is you want to do, and I'll tell you if there is a way to do it."

"I want to get inside that house and go through it from end to end and from top to bottom, without a person who is now inside of it suspecting that I am there."

"When?"

"The sooner the better."

"To-night?"

"To-night, if you think it can be done to-night."

"Ain't you tired out?"

"Not quite," laughed Nick.

"You jest want to do some looking around on this first trip, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you're willing to leave these boys behind until the next time?"

"Certainly; I intend to do that."

"I only suggested it because two can travel so much stiller than five could. Are you stout in your arms? Could you go up a rope hand over hand?"

"Yes; and carry you on my shoulders while I did it," replied Nick.

"Honest?"

For reply, Nick rose from his chair, went around the table and before Black Douglass knew what he intended to do, seized him and raised him high over his head, where he held him balanced on one hand. After a moment he replaced him on the floor and resumed his chair as if nothing had happened; and Douglass stood gazing across the table at him with amazement in his eyes.

"Born that way?" he asked, presently.

"Growed," said Nick, with a smile.

"Any more in the family like you?"

"Yes; that sick one, up at Peter's Castle, when he's well and on earth."

"Well, sir, I didn't ask to be inquisitive, but jest to suggest that if you didn't happen to have any brothers and wanted one, you'd take me on as an applicant. Gush! Say! you're stouter than a moose. And say!

it's most ten o'clock, and if you are for going to the castle to-night, we'd better get a hustle on us.

"Boys," he added, "make yourselves to home. We'll be back about daylight, ef nothing don't happen to us. Come on, Nick Carter."

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE MERCY OF VAMPIRES.

The approach to Peter's Castle was sufficiently hazardous in daylight, but in the darkness of a cloudy night it would have been impossible to anybody less lynx-eyed than Black Douglass.

But he strode forward with never a misstep, and seemed to know his way and to see the path as well as if the sun had been shining upon it.

After an hour and a half of steady tramping and climbing, he came to an abrupt pause and, in a whisper, announced:

"Here we are. The castle is directly ahead of us."

Nick could discern a big, black mass which looked like a darker part of the mountain, directly in front of him.

"Is that the building?" he asked.

"That's what it is."

"Are we in front of it, behind it, or where?"

"We're dead in front of it. You couldn't get behind it very well unless you stood inside the mountain."

"How are we to get inside the house?"

"I'll show you in a minute. Do you remember that I told you if you could climb a rope, hand over hand?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's what you've got to do if you get into the house without their knowing it."

"Do what?"

"Climb up a rope. I'll show you. Come on."

He led the way in a wide detour around the house until they approached the cliff against which it had been built, and at a distance of about forty rods from the castle.

"There's a fissure in this rock," Douglass whispered. "It's mighty narrow and you'll have to crawl on your belly and squeeze through as best you can for a little way; after that it's wider and you can stand up and walk. Inside, there's a rope dangling from a ledge of rocks about fifty feet up, and behind that ledge there is a cave. Well, that cave takes us out where you can crawl out on the roof of the castle and look into the house through that glass dome. Then, when you get tired of doing that. I can show you a way into the house from the roof. I've been there before."

"Do the people in the house know about this fissure, the rope and the cave?"

"I don't think so. If they knowed about it, they would have had it down long before this, I'm thinking. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then."

Everything occurred exactly as Douglass had explained, and after crowding through the fissure, climbing the rope, crawling through the cave and so working their way down the side of the rock to the roof of the house, the guide led Nick to a spot where he had worked one of the prismatic sections of the glass loose so that it could be removed, and lifting it out, he motioned for Nick to peer inside.

It was only with a decided effort that the detective could suppress a cry of amazement when he applied his eyes to that opening.

The reader already knows what sort of a room it was into which he looked, for it was the same in which Chick had awakened that morning where the long and nerve-racking interview had taken place between him and Irma Plavatski, and where he had at last fainted from sheer exhaustion, due to the effects of it.

But now, many hours had passed since Chick had

fainted from weakness under her ministrations. It was morning when that happened; it was nearly midnight now.

Nevertheless the scene upon which the detective looked down was none the less startling than that one might have been had he been permitted to see it.

He saw Chick, stretched upon the couch, as we saw him earlier in the story.

The assistant looked almost like a dead man, so pale was he; and he appeared to be sleeping—nor was it difficult to determine the nature of that sleep.

Even as Nick peered through the opening, Irma Plavatski was bending over her victim, and her hands were extended above him, as if she was still engaged in the work of forcing him into a hypnotic sleep.

Nick could feel a chill of horror creep along his spine as he watched the woman, for he had never in all his experience looked upon such a spectacle as this.

Her eyes were glowing like coals of fire; her lips were as red as the petals of a peony—blood-red, in fact—and almost repulsive in their brilliancy; and they were parted, showing her wondrous white and even teeth behind them, now somehow looking sharp and menacing.

And while he looked, she continued to sway over the couch where Chick was lying, until her motion reminded Nick of the swinging movement of a cobra's head before it is ready to strike.

Nor was that all which met his vision.

Dazaar and Chick were not alone in the room.

Around the couch where they were, drawn up in a semi-circle, were sixteen swarthy men, all arrayed in their native garb, the flowing robes of the Orient, some with turbans on their heads, some without, and all were bending forward eagerly, watching the motions of the woman at the couch, while they chanted in low tones words that were utterly unintelligible to the listener.

Nick Carter could see that Chick was totally unconscious, and he could understand also that Irma Plavatski seemed to be so enraptured with her occupation that she had forgotten even the presence of her followers.

That he had surprised them in the performance of some religious rite of the Devil Worshipers, Nick Carter had not a doubt; and that he was totally helpless to interfere in time to do aught to prevent what was to occur, he also realized.

Whatever it might be, he must remain silent, and observe.

He could not have broken through the glass dome if he had tried, for he had no implement with him with which to perform such an act; and even if it could have been done, it would have availed him nothing, for he was forty feet above them, and—but why even consider the thought?

Then, he almost uttered a cry of horror when he saw the woman suddenly dart forward, like a carnivorous bird upon its prey, and swoop down almost like one, upon the unconscious form of Chick.

He saw her bury her face in his neck and cling there as if she were indeed what she had told him she was—a vampire.

He drew his revolver and raised it as if to fire, but he hesitated to do so even then; and while he hesitated, the scene changed.

Irma suddenly raised herself from the recumbent position over Chick, and stood upon her feet again, and then she slowly turned her back upon him.

For a moment she stood facing her companions, who continued their low chanting, and then, waving her hands in the air, she approached them slowly while they as slowly receded, backing away from her, never lessening or increasing the distance between them, until they faded out of sight beyond some curtain which shaded a door at the farther side of the circular room.

When they had disappeared she paused for a moment and looked back over her shoulder toward Chick.

Then, suddenly, she darted toward the curtain, peered through and beyond it for a moment, and then turning again hastened back into the room and to the couch.

Again she bent over the form of Chick, but for some reason all the horrible aspect of her previous act had disappeared.

Even the terrible red of her lips was gone. Had she wiped it away? Her eyes had ceased to glow as with a cruel fire. Her entire aspect was changed, and Nick watched her with a new interest, wondering what she was about to do now.

But he was not long left in doubt.

To his infinite surprise and amazement, she stroked Chick's forehead gently with her right hand until he opened his eyes and seemed to be in possession of his senses again.

Then she leaned forward over him, and Nick, directly above almost, could hear her say in a half whisper:

"You are better now, and you are rested. You will sleep well, and you will be better in the morning." And he heard Chick reply:

"I hope so."

"Do you think that you could learn to trust me after awhile?" he heard her ask him.

"I don't know, Irma. You have certainly kept your word with me thus far. I can't protect myself, you know. I am weak, a prisoner, and in your power. You could drink my blood if you chose and I could not prevent it."

"Nor could I prevent it if they knew that I was deceiving them," she murmured.

"And did they think that I was unconscious, and that you were sucking the blood from the veins in my neck?"

"Ay; and they are waiting for me now to go to them. I must leave you. Good-night."

"Good-night. I wish you would let me say, God help you in your remorse. I will think it, anyway. Good-night."

She did not reply to him in words, but she bent forward and pressed her lips against his forehead, after which, without a word or a glance toward him again, she left the room through the curtained doorway, and Nick could hear the closing and locking of a door after she had passed through it.

"What does it all mean?" he asked himself. "Has Irma Plavatski indeed repented, and is the fiendishness of Dazaar a thing of the past? It would seem so, for it is certain that she was practicing the art of the vampire, and that her followers believed she was performing it. I will know all about it before long."

He drew the section of glass still farther off the dome and, pressing his face through the opening, called as loudly as he dared:

"Chick, I am here to rescue you. Hush! Don't try to answer me. Raise your right hand for yes and your left hand for no. Are you in any immediate danger?"

The left hand was raised.

"Will you be entirely safe twenty-four hours longer?"

The right hand was raised.

"Good!" said Nick. "I'll have you out of this to-morrow night. Now, look out, Chick. I'm going to drop a revolver on your couch. Get it and put it under the blanket. It may come handy to-morrow night. Good-by till then."

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST DEFIANCE OF DAZAAR.

Nick Carter did not deem it wise to risk the success of the venture that was to be made the succeeding night by an attempt to enter and reconnoiter the house then.

and so as soon as he had warned Chick of his presence, he withdrew, accompanied by Black Douglass.

During all that day he remained inside the cabin of the guide with his assistants, laying out the plan of operation for the night, and instructing them in every act he wished them to perform.

There was not a move that could be made which he had not thought out and prepared to meet, and so, when night fell, they all awaited impatiently the moment for starting out for Peter's Castle.

A few moments before midnight found them assembled in the cave overlooking the castle, for it was a part of Nick's plans to gain admittance to the house, and to surprise the Devil Worshipers and vampires at the moment of the midnight hour, when they were all assembled in the room under the dome to witness the ceremony upon which Nick had chanced to look the preceding night.

The way into the castle was through the roof.

As has already been described, there were two towers and a dome to the castle, and in the space between one of the towers and the dome there was a scuttle, to which Black Douglass guided them.

This scuttle was not even fastened, and Douglass explained that long ago he had removed the fastenings, the probability being that the present inmates of the house did not even know of its existence, or if they did, had no thought of any person approaching the house from that way, since there was apparently nothing but the smooth side of the mountain for a pathway.

Nick Carter led the way through the scuttle, Ten-Inch came next, then Patsy, then Pommery, and last of all, Douglass. This was the order given by the detective, who had received from Douglass a very good description of the interior of the house, and who felt that he preferred to have his own assistants close to him, while Douglass could do the scouting in the rear.

The entrance to the dome was on what should have been the ground floor, if the house had not been built on the precipitous side of a mountain. At all events it was down several flights of stairs from the scuttle where our friends made their entrance.

They advanced stealthily, in their stockinged feet, for each one of the party had pulled black socks over his shoes in order that their feet might make no noise.

With unerring directness, the detective made for the entrance to the dome—the room where Chick was even now undergoing the ordeal of pretending that he was hypnotized while the woman vampire sucked blood from the veins in his neck.

It was horrible even to contemplate—horrible to think about, even though Nick knew that it was all a pretense, and that Chick would not be injured.

As he had hoped, the door behind the curtain which opened into the dome room was not even closed. It had been left ajar by the eager devotees, who, of course, had no thought or suspicion of possible interruption.

Perceiving this, Nick crept forward silently, at the same time motioning to his companions to hold back, for there was a soft light throughout the rooms so that objects could be dimly seen by them.

Stepping close to the curtain, the detective peered through at the scene within, which was a precise repetition of what he had witnessed the night before, and at almost the same stage of it, too.

Perceiving this, and realizing that there would be a good quarter of an hour or more before any of the followers of Dazaar would think of coming out of the room where they were so busily engaged in watching the ceremony, he drew a ball of heavy twine from his pocket and at once began to stretch it in every direction across the room, making it fast to the furniture and to everything which would hold it with sufficient firmness.

Length after length of it was stretched in this way, the nearest one to the door through which he expected the vampires to appear being more than halfway across

the great room from it, so that there would be no doubt that every one of them would have passed from the door before the attack commenced.

At the doorway, where the room opened into the hall, another heavy cord was stretched at a height where it would catch the neck of any person who attempted to pass; and this was done so that if one of them should attempt to escape and make a run for it, he would be caught at the door and thrown back with the force of having received a blow in the face.

If any one of you, my readers, has ever run against a clothesline in the dark, you will thoroughly understand the efficacy of this arrangement.

Next, Nick stationed Ten-Ichi and Patsy, with Black Douglas on one side of the door at which their expected victims must enter from the dome, and with Pomeroy beside him, he took the opposite post.

Each one of them was armed with a section of heavy wire cable, covered with a piece of rubber hose stretched over it. A terribly effective weapon, and one which is as silent almost as death itself—and quite as deadly, if the blow be hard enough.

Nick's instructions regarding that point had been:

"Strike, not too hard; but hard enough. Do not kill; but stun, even if you have to break heads to do it."

They could hear the low chanting of the devotees on the other side of the door while they waited, and then, suddenly it seemed to be coming nearer, and Nick raised one hand in warning to his companions, for the moment was at hand and the vampires were approaching, looking out as they had done the preceding night, with their eyes fixed upon their high priestess, who was deceiving them.

Nick hoped that it was their custom to look all the way across the outer room; he felt certain that they at least endeavored to look until the last one was free from the door—and in this he was correct.

Presently the first of them appeared.

He was approaching with his back toward the detectives and their guide; his head was bowed low and his body was bent forward. The others, to a man, had assumed exactly the same positions.

Nothing could have played better into the hands of the detective and his desires for the conflict that was to come.

Drawing back ever so little, he watched the men with eager eyes until the last one—and he counted them as they approached—had passed through the door; and then——

The Orientals were startled into uprightness by the sound of a low whistle, and at the same instant, five distinct thuds, followed instantly by five more, and beneath the ten blows of which the thuds were the announcement, ten men went down as suddenly as if they had died in their tracks, on their feet.

To the Orientals, fresh from the orgy of their terrible rites, and attacked thus suddenly where they deemed themselves most safe from attack, it must have seemed as if vengeance had fallen upon them out of heaven.

They seemed to be in a swimming circle of terrible clubs which fell upon them without ceasing, for the five men who attacked them each held two, and each one did its swift and terrible execution.

Ten of the devotees were down before they realized that they were attacked, and four more were down ere they could turn to escape by running.

Silent always, it never occurred to these men to shout, or to cry out in alarm; their only thought was to escape.

In the meantime Nick Carter and his companions were raining blows upon them with the speed of flashing lightning, and they were falling like grass before a scythe.

Fourteen were down and insensible, or pretended still, and five of these six endeavored to escape by r[illegible]

ning, but before they had taken three steps they came in contact with the cords that had been stretched across the room in all directions, and they were sent sprawling upon the floor; and there the merciless clubs fell upon them without ceasing—upon all save one of the five.

He reached the doorway. He undertook to leap through it, but the rope that had been put there caught him by the throat, and he was lifted from his feet as if by a force from beneath, and hurled into the air to fall back again almost into the arms of Black Douglass, who quickly choked him into insensibility.

But there is still a sixth man to account for, and that person was Gothmar.

Gothmar, the silent; Gothmar, the terrible; Gothmar, the strangler.

Gothmar had not forgotten his avocation.

When the blows fell upon the heads of his associates, they somehow left him unscathed.

Instinctively he clutched his strangling cord and drew it from his waist, where he carried it always.

With the same motion he threw aside the robes he had been wearing, and thus left himself naked, save for the breech cloth he wore about his loins.

He had no thought of flying—of attempting to escape. He smelled blood in the air, and he desired a victim.

As he turned to face his enemies, he saw one—Ten-Ichi.

Ten-Ichi was nearest to Gothmar, and Ten-Ichi raised his club to strike.

But the cord of the strangler was quicker.

It darted forward like a snake. It touched the neck of the little Jap. It circled around his throat and the last one I feel that he was in the toils of something from which there is supposed to be no escape when once it strikes its victim.

He knew perfectly well what it was, and—he knew how to defend himself from it. Knew how as only a Jap trained in the muscular exercises peculiar to that country can know.

Instantly he dropped his hands to his sides and stiffened his muscles. Then he threw his head forward until the muscles of his neck swelled to thrice their natural size; and thus he stood, fighting with his distended muscles the cord of the strangler; thus he stood when the Oriental ran against the rope in the doorway and was hurled back into the arms of Black Douglass; thus he still stood while Gothmar strained with all his brute strength upon the terrible cord, to choke his victim to death, and thus they were both standing when Nick Carter struck down his last man, and turning, discovered them.

Not three seconds had elapsed since the cord touched the neck of Ten-Ichi, but three seconds is an interminable time when there is the cord of a professional strangler biting at your throat.

With a bound Nick Carter was upon the almost naked Hindu.

He seized him by the throat with one hand, and by the breech cloth with the other.

Then, drawing himself back, he lifted the strangler clear from the floor, held him there, trembling for an instant, and then, with the force of a projectile from a catapult, he flung him across the room and against the wall of the house as if he had been a bag of meal.

Gothmar struck with a force that was terrible. You could have heard the bones of his body crack as he came in contact with the wall; and then he fell to the floor, bleeding, senseless, with arms and legs and ribs crushed and splintered.

And Ten-Ichi?

He raised his hands and coolly unwound the cord from his throat, looked at it a moment, folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Never touched me," he said to Nick, smiling; "but I could not have stood the strain three seconds longer."

"Bind these fellows, Ten-Ichi, as I instructed you," said Nick. "Patsy, Pommery, Douglass, help Ten-Ichi."

Then he leaped to the door, pushed aside the curtains and passed through into the room under the dome.

When he sprang into that room, he was in the act of darting forward toward the couch where he knew he would find Chick, when he was brought to a sudden standstill by the sight he saw before him, and he realized that for once he was in a position where he was helpless.

Chick was there upon the couch, just as he had seen him from the hole in the roof of the dome.

Behind the couch and facing toward the detective, stood Irma Plavatska.

She was looking toward him when he entered through the door, as if she had been expecting him, and there was a smile upon her face which Nick Carter could not define. He could not tell whether it was defiance or derision that she intended to express; but what he did know was that she held in her hand the revolver he had thrown through the roof of the dome upon Chick's couch, and that the muzzle of it was pointing straight at Chick's heart.

For one brief instant he thought of trying one of his own wonderful snap shots in the hope that it would succeed; but then he thought that even if his bullet killed her, in falling she might press the trigger of the weapon she held, and thus kill Chick in spite of him.

And so he halted, stood perfectly still and waited.

Presently she addressed him.

"You see I am waiting for you, Nick Carter," she said. "You see also that I am prepared for you. You realize that I could do you a great injury as I stand here, do you not? I could kill the man you love best in all the world—Chick. He is too weak to defend himself; so you understand, I could kill him—if I would.

"You realize, perhaps, that I could kill you also if I should raise the muzzle of this weapon ever so little and pull the trigger. You do not dare to shoot at me, for you know that you could not prevent me from sending one bullet into Chick, but you could not.

"For once I have the mastery over you, if only for a moment; but it is a sweet moment to me.

"Would you ask me why? I will tell you.

"Because I have it in my power to do you one favor which you will appreciate—which you will never forget. Do you know what that is?

"It is not to spare you; it is not to spare this man whom you love; but——"

She hesitated an instant, and then continued:

"It is to rid you forever of the worst enemy you ever had—thus!"

As she ceased speaking, she turned the weapon suddenly upon herself and pulled the trigger, and the bullet thus sped went true to its mark, piercing her brain and as she fell, she toppled forward upon Chick so that her corpse lay directly across him.

And this, my reader, is the last, was the last of Dazaar.

That inexplicable character went to her death without a word of explanation, without an expression of remorse, and with a smile.

That she had somehow been in a measure transformed in character since the wedding ceremony she went through with Chick, is the only explanation of her conduct which can be offered. It is certain, however, that she was kindness itself to the young assistant while he was in her power at Peter's Castle, and he believes and will always believe that she had him abducted and taken there for the sole purpose of saving his life.

It is certain that he recovered and is now perfectly well, or he would not be editing these histories of the adventures of Nick Carter.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 397, will contain "The Crime of a Money King; or, The Battle of the Magnates." This case is one in which Mr. Carter, himself, takes a peculiar interest. It is one in which he controlled the whole financial system of New York and America for a season. Reading it will give you the real secrets of matters that have only been lightly touched upon in some of the recent financial investigations, and will show you the silent but powerful part played by the detective in an affair which might have spelled ruin for half the financiers in America.

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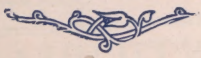

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